

Transcript: “Making Sense of Change: Using a 2-Cent Coin to Follow the Johnson Family from Sherwood Forest Plantation to Fredericksburg

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In the summer of 2017, UMW students attending the archaeology field school, run by the department of historic preservation, excavated some “test units” at Sherwood Forest Plantation in Stafford County, Virginia.

Test units are 5x5 foot squares dug into the ground and excavated one layer of soil at a time. While digging, the field school uncovered an 1865 2-cent coin near a mid-19th century duplex, that was once used as a quarter to house enslaved people.

This coin weighed in at 6 grams and is 2.27 centimeters in diameter. One side coin displays a shield with a banner that states “In God We Trust” which is illustrative of the increase religious sentiment after the Civil War. The other side of the coin has a wreath with the words “2 Cents” in the center and the words “United States of America” above wreath. 20 million of these coins were produced between 1864 and 1873.

The Johnson family, likely recently freed African Americans, occupied the duplex where the coin was found. Wyatt and Rose Johnson, along with their children, Martha, Edgar, and Mary Johnson were listed on the 1870 census for the plantation. In this census, Wyatt was listed as a farm laborer and Martha was listed as a domestic servant, they both probably worked on the plantation where they lived. It was not uncommon for recently emancipated people in the south to continue to work as field and domestic laborers on former plantations.

In 1883, Thomas Fortune of the New York Globe wrote that farm laborers made about 57 cents an hour and “of this 57 cents they rarely saw a cent of currency”. Often employers and

local shopkeepers would take orders on their paychecks for goods and services instead of paying them actual physical currency. However we know that Wyatt Johnson had some financial agency as the 1870 census lists him owning \$100 worth of property.

By the 1880 census, the Johnson family still lived on Sherwood forest plantation and more children, Robert, Wyatt, Rose and Sarah Johnson were born. The census also revealed that most of their children had attended school in the past year, however, none of them could read nor write. In the years following the Civil War, many African American leaders stressed the importance of both getting an education and owning property in order to achieve full economic independence.

This might be one of the reasons why the Johnsons decided to make the move to Fredericksburg in 1891. Wyatt Johnson purchased 520 George Street from a white woman named Juliet A. Perry. This property was located in Liberty Town, a developing black neighborhood. Liberty Town was originally established as a separate white suburban community in 1812, it was annexed into the City of Fredericksburg in 1851. Antebellum liberty town grew slowly, and by 1830 there were only 16 buildings in the community, most of these buildings were considered “substantial” valued at \$800 dollars or more. Most of the original Liberty Town was destroyed in the battle of Fredericksburg, reducing most of the houses to mere lots. Many businessmen took advantage of the destruction of Liberty Town and would construct cheap homes for laborers. Henry Deane was a successful black businessman who purchased a good portion of the lots in Liberty Town and constructed affordable housing.

Here is the 1891 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of 520 George Street, it is unclear if this map was completed before or after the Johnsons purchased the property. Fronting George Street,

there is a one story dwelling with an addition and another dwelling to the south fronting an alley way that is also only one story tall. This contrasts the 1902 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map where the southern dwelling no longer exists and the dwelling that was fronting George street was replaced with a new dwelling that was two stories tall. To the southwest of the dwelling is a small one story outbuilding. Historical documents imply that the original structures, existing on the property when the Johnsons bought it, were demolished and replaced with the structures seen on the 1902 Sanborn Maps. Wyatt Johnson hired C.G. Heflin to build a house for \$400 on March 14th in 1894. However, Wyatt Johnson failed on making payments on his new home and was sued by C.G. Heflin, in the following case, Wyatt Johnson would plead insanity. He was set to be sent to a mental hospital in Petersburg, however as the Daily Star describes, the “messenger of death came first” and he passed away on April 29th, 1894. The Johnsons were able to keep the house, however, and lived there until 1912 when they sold it.

One of the reasons they may have moved to Fredericksburg was better access to education. A “colored school” was built in 1883 on the corner of Wolfe Street and Princess Anne Street. In 1892, this school had 595 students attending it, likely, the Johnson children would have been among those numbers as this would be an easy walk from 520 George Street.

The 1900 census reveals that most of Rose and Wyatt’s older children have already moved out and presumably started families of their own. The census shows the addition of two more children in the Johnson family, Bettie and Albert as well as the marriage of Wyatt J.R. to Susan and the marriage of Sarah Johnson to John H. Harris. Both of the couples had children of their own that lived in the house, Wyatt and Susan had Andrew Johnson and Sarah and John had Rosetta and James Harris. Of the household members all of Wyatt and Rose’s kids knew how to read and write and Albert was listed as currently “at school”.

The education the Johnson children received helped them become successful later on in life. While Rose Johnson died in 1908, Albert Johnson and his sister Sarah Harris and her family would stay in the house until at least the 1910 census. All the members of the household, aside from John J.R. Harris who was 5, knew how to read and write.

However, by the 1920 census, Albert is now married to Dorothy Johnson and is living with Dorothy's father in 521 Hanover Street. His wife, Dorothy is listed as a teacher and he is listed as an "owner" but does not specify an owner of what. Sarah Harris and her family are not found on this 1920 census and they may not have lived in Fredericksburg at this time.

The 1930 census is more revealing, Albert and his wife's family still live at 521 Hanover Street but he is listed as a proprietor to a café. His sister, Sarah and her husband also reappear on this census. John S.R. is listed as a contractor in cement work, his son, John J.R. is listed as a cement worker and probably works with or for his father. They now live at 1104 Douglas Street.

The 1938 City Directory of Fredericksburg gives us the address of where the café Albert owns is. It appears that he began living in his café sometime between the 1930 census and the 1938 city directory. The café was not located far from Albert's childhood home, only a street away. The building the café was in, no longer exists, now it's the parking lot to 520 William Street and included in that address's parcel. With the move to Fredericksburg, Wyatt and Rose Johnson were able to provide their children an education that could help them move up the social ladder. Albert Johnson was able to learn how to read and write in school and would later be able to own his own business and land, achieving what many African American leaders encouraged African Americans to strive for after the Civil war. Who knew a 2-cent coin could tell such a complex narrative of postbellum life for African Americans?

520 George Street served the Johnson family well and provided a home for the Johnsons for almost two decades. However, it begs the question, what happened to the house on 520 George Street? The address no longer exists. The Johnsons sold it to Alvin T. Embrey, a well known businessman in Fredericksburg who owned many properties and land. The house remains about the same in both the 1919 and 1927 Sanborn Maps and another African American family, the Grays was renting the house in the 1920 census.

But Alvin T. Embrey would eventually sell it to Julian Garner in 1928 with many restrictions that would limit who could live and use the property until 1950. The restrictions made to where only a single wealthy white family could live and construct a house on the property.

This sale would also combine 520 George Street's parcel with its neighboring parcels, creating a large piece of land. Where 520 George Street sat is on the property of both 508 and 510 George Street. Both of these properties have a large colonial revival style home built on them, however location of the original 520 George Street has no building atop it. Dependent on how disturbed the property was during the construction of those homes, there may be intact archaeological material from the 520 George Street house, and thus materials related to the Johnson's life in early Liberty Town. Very few archaeological and historical studies of postbellum and Jim Crow era African American life have been conducted in Fredericksburg. Such material, if they survive have the potential to reveal information about the day to day lives of an African American workman's family in the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century.

I plan to use the ground work I laid out with this project to pursue an independent study next year under the Department of Historic Preservation.

My independent study will focus on the postbellum African American community in Liberty Town to gain a better understanding of urban African American life after the Civil War. I will complete a "Chain of Title" on the Liberty Street property and the Hanover Street property. I will also conduct additional research on the individual Johnson family members and similar African American families in Fredericksburg during the late nineteenth century.

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